

Levens Parish Council

Levens Community Project

Response to a letter from Mr A.Taylor received on 7 October 2014

This document provides responses to the questions asked in a letter received on 7 October 2014 from Mr Andrew Taylor (on behalf of a number of residents). For clarity, each question has been repeated below in **bold** type, with the Parish Council's response attached.

Peter Davidson
Clerk to the Council

5 Nov 2014

1. When and where will the thoughts and questions requested at the Public Consultation be published and answered?

At the last Parish Council meeting it was agreed by the Councillors that all Q & A's would be published in the Oct'14 edition of the Parish News- no publication could be found. There appears to be no easy access to any information regarding the Project despite frequent requests made by Parishioners who wish to see all democratic obligations fulfilled. This leaves us in some doubt as to the Councillors declared intentions: 'to emphasise that all feed back is welcome in order to ensure that the project meets the needs and aspirations of the Levens Community'.

All Q&A's can be found on the Parish Council page of the village website.

Although notes were taken at the first public consultation, these were not comprehensive. The Parish Council recognises that there is still a lack of clarity regarding the project. The Council therefore intends to hold a meeting on 25 November, dedicated to the Levens Community project. The aim is to provide as clear a picture as possible of the status of the project and the forward plan, and to provide an opportunity for residents to ask questions and make comments.

2. At the first meeting there was a concern voiced by many that the 'yes' vote for a village hall, in the survey, appears to have been taken as mandate to proceed with the project omitting to mention this would involve evicting allotment holders, selling land, building homes etc. At the meeting what appeared to be a reasonable request was made to ask the question again but give all the information including the positives and the negatives of the project, would that not be reasonable and a democratic way forward?

We note there appears to be no answer to this question, please could you provide one.

At this stage, the Parish Council is only working to establish whether the project is viable. There is no commitment to proceed with the sale of any land or the construction of any buildings.

In order to establish the viability of the project at a most basic level, the council is working towards submitting outline planning for Sizergh, Cotes, Underhill and Church Road allotments, and detailed planning for the village hall and for the conversion of the Institute.

The benefit of this approach is that, without making any commitment to sell any land, the council can establish whether the plots are valuable as building land. For example, if outline planning was refused for

Sizergh and Cotes, then it would be clear that the sale of the land would raise little capital and therefore that the whole project was not viable.

Given that this basic feasibility work is supported by grant funding (see below), the council sees this as a sensible first step in establishing the viability of the project.

If the outcome of the planning application is that outline planning is granted for Sizergh and Cotes and subject to any planning restrictions that might be applied, then the next step would be for the council to commission a detailed business plan. The council recognises that this needs to be undertaken by suitably qualified professionals. Such a business plan would examine not only the capital outlay vs the potential income from sale of land, but also assess the potential running costs vs the income from both a new village hall and the Institute flats.

Only after the results of this business plan were available would the council (and the village) be in a position to fully understand the true viability of the project.

3. It is apparent that costs have been incurred to date on this project, are these costs available? Where has the funding come from?

The Parish Council submitted an application for grant funding to Homes & Community Agency for funding to cover anticipated costs of £57820. This amount was the estimate from the architect, to take the project through to:

- outline planning submitted for Sizergh, Cotes, Church Hill allotments and Underhill.
- detailed planning for the village hall and for conversion of the Institute.

H&C agency has approved this application. H&C will fund 90% of the cost estimate submitted, ie £52000. The Parish Council is looking at options for funding the remaining 10% of the costs, which avoid recourse to using precept funding.

The Council has applied for release of the first tranche of funding, amounting to 50% of the full amount, ie £26000. This funding has been released.

In terms of costs incurred to date, the Parish Council has been maintaining a separate record of receipts and payments relating to the Levens Community Project. As of 1 April 2014, there was a balance of just over £100 in this fund, which represented the residue of previously obtained grant funding. Since then, there have been the following transactions:

Receipts 2014/15				
Date	Description	Amount £		
09/06/2014	VAT refund	1,034.80		
17/10/2014	H&C Agency grant	26,019.00		
	Total	27,053.80		
Payments 2014/15				
Date	Description	Amount £	VAT £	Total £
08/07/2014	Damson Consultancy: printing leaflets	50.00	10.00	60.00
08/07/2014	Damson Consultancy: preliminary masterplanning work	1,000.00	200.00	1,200.00
08/07/2014	Room hire	75.00		75.00
12/08/2014	S.Read: Land registry searches	35.24		35.24
13/08/2014	Damson Consultancy: initial design work	4,000.00	800.00	4,800.00
09/09/2014	Room hire	50.00		50.00
14/10/2014	Spatial Data: surveys	1,330.00	266.00	1,596.00
14/10/2014	E3P: surveys	1,600.00	320.00	1,920.00
	Total	8,140.24	1,596.00	9,736.24

Which costs are recoverable if the project were not to proceed?

As explained in 2. above, there is no commitment to proceed beyond this initial stage of establishing the basic viability of the project, by submitting planning. Costs for this initial feasibility work are 90% covered by grant funding, and the Council is looking to bridge the remaining 10% without recourse to precept funding.

With no professionally prepared budget in place at this time, this gives parishioners little confidence in the viability of this project.

As explained in 2. above, it is the Council's intention to have a professionally prepared business plan drawn up. However, the Council does not intend to embark on this until after the planning decisions are clear, to avoid wasting time, effort and money. For example, if planning is refused for Sizergh and Cotes, there is no need for a business plan because the non-viability of the project will be self-evident.

Further to the Council ('Q & A' -10/09/14-Phase 1- Funding and Development) and the comment 'Costs incurred have recently been wholly covered by previously-obtained grant funding': Where has this grant come from; how much was it for; are the Council in actual receipt of this grant; have all costs incurred to date been settled in full with this funding or are there out-standing debts to pay and is there a breakdown of these costs available for parishioners information?

Please see 3. above for an explanation of the grant funding.

In terms of invoices paid vs outstanding and future invoices, please see Attachment 1. This is a detailed spreadsheet compiled and maintained by Damson Design. It covers the professional fees associated with taking the village hall and Institute through to detailed planning, and the plots at Sizergh, Cotes, Underhill and Church Road through to outline planning. On this spreadsheet, the figures in black represent the original estimates submitted to the Homes & Communities Agency as the basis for the grant application. The figures in blue represent the cost of the work undertaken to date (as of 1 October). Under the heading of "Total Budgets", you will find these numbers totalled up. You will also find the currently invoiced figures, the amount still to be invoiced and the currently estimated cost to completion.

The Councillors term 'cost neutral' is subjective and clearly does not take into account the impact the project will cause both in the disruption, sense of loss and possible financial consequences to a large body of your Parishioners lives. In addition the financial risks that will be taken on the 1.3 million pound project that to date has no actual professionally prepared budget and no guarantee that all the proposed separate land parcel sales could be achieved.

Please see the comments above on the plan for a business plan to be drawn up.

With regard to Levens Charity funds (100k) (which you are still investigating if you can use). It is likely that these funds will be required for village use at some future date and it is therefore important to safeguard it for this purpose and, in the event that it is used, complete transparency is given to all Parishioners. As the Council have failed to make all information with regard to this project easily accessible how are they going to achieve transparency in this instance.

At the Parish Council meeting held on 14 October, the following was minuted: "The Secretary recommended against removing capital from the charity in order to provide funding for the proposed new village hall, as this would reduce the income and potentially render the charity ineffective. Trustees endorsed this recommendation."

4. Before the first meeting there must have been a proposed budget for the project, at the meeting requests were made but always received no answer, was a budget prepared and who prepared it? Did this budget include all areas including village hall costs, professional fees (legal, engineers, consultants etc) , written land valuations, written build costs, contingency, service costs etc.

We assume from the Q & A 10/09/14 that the answer is no can you confirm this?

As described in the Q&A note, the Council has an indicative view of the capital costs of building the village hall and converting the Institute, and some indicative valuations for the parcels of land. See comments above on the plan for a detailed business plan to be drawn up.

5. Is there clear written confirmation from SLDC or similar for their financial support?

The council are receiving no financial support from SLDC.

Are we correct that the only funding available to date is the 'verbal confirmation' for 50k and an investigation into the Levens Charity Funds?

See 3. above.

6. Are the residents of Sizergh being treated as the allotment holders and residents adjacent to the other proposed areas relating to the village hall e.g. being kept out of the loop or is the whole village being kept out of the loop?

It is not the Council's intention to keep anybody "out of the loop". Nevertheless, the council does recognise that it has to work harder to communicate the plans for this project. That is why a dedicated meeting is being called for the 25th November.

It would appear from the information you have supplied that the building on the allotments has moved to phase 2, was this decision based on the strong objections raised, quite rightly, by the allotment holders? Is it a case of who shouts loudest has proposals nearest to them shelved? From the first meeting the attitude of those presenting the meeting was that there was no obligation for the allotments to be re-sited and if it became a necessity then there may be a shady corner possible somewhere in the village for them to go? Likewise the tenants of Sizergh Fell Quarry have in many cases been long serving tenants and we ask the question what alternatives do you propose for them?

The proposal to build a new village hall and convert the Institute, funded by the sale of land at Sizergh and Cotes, represents the core of the project. This is Phase 1.

The explanation of the reasoning behind Phase 2 was given in the Q&A note, but is repeated here for completeness:

Phase 2, the construction of 2 or 3 affordable homes for families, is an option which the Parish Council is considering. A number of factors will need to be considered, including:

- *The funding remaining following the completion of Phase 1.*
- *Whether the Council considers it appropriate to sell the land on Church Road currently used for allotments, to provide additional funding.*
- *If the Church Road allotment land was sold, what alternative arrangements for allotments would be provided.*
- *The cost of relocating allotments and/or provision of alternative allotments.*

Because of the uncertainties, the Council considers it premature at this stage to make any decisions on Phase 2. An appropriate timescale to give consideration to Phase 2 is mid-2015, when the Phase 1 financial situation will be far clearer.

**7. Given cost of manpower and materials is on the increase has this been built into the budget?
*With regard to the Councils 'Summary of Development costs' – Do we assume that the cost increase allowance of 100k (approximately 8%) on an indicative budget from 12 months ago, which would not start (looking at your schedule) for another 12 months at least, plus an additional 12 months to build. Is this the only additional financial provision made? We assume within that number (as it is shown nowhere else) that cost overruns and contingencies would need to be found. Also, and with due respect to the architect, you have employed we do not believe many developers or banks would be prepared to fund plot values of approximately 120k on a scheme with no planning. If you spend additional monies on planning there is no guarantee that a developer would build that scheme and want to go through the planning process again before paying for the land.***

See earlier comments about the need for a business plan.

8. Has a fully budgeted proposal for the running costs and maintenance of the village hall and affordable housing been drawn up?

You have skirted around the running cost issue and it is a concern that in the future the parish may end up meeting any short fall. It would appear from your Q & A 10/09/14 that your running costs will be OK as they are at Chipping Hall. Is this a sufficiently strong enough basis to proceed?

See earlier comments about the need for a business plan.

9. If the project were to proceed and at some point in the future financially fail who would be responsible for the debt?

If you proceed on this basis and costs run away from you (given parishioners confidence in the figures to date is very low) where will the costs be picked up- will it be by the parishioners?

See earlier comments about the need for a business plan.

As residents of Sizergh and the Parish of Levens we are most concerned that the village hall project seems to have been set on course and no matter what the opinion of the fellow residents of the parish, a minority seem set to move this project forward whatever. We understand the need for affordable homes in the village but there will shortly be that option available at NO cost to the village when the land outlined in the local plan is developed. This would be a point where a Parish Council and SLDC could influence the developer on the mix of the 33% of affordable homes they will provide. So is the Parish Council becoming a developer/building contractor the only way that and affordable home provision could be met?

You chose in your brief response not to acknowledge and comment upon the above final paragraph and we would be grateful if you could do so for clarity. Finally we remain surprised at the seeming lack of knowledge with regard to the project amongst the Parish Councillors present at the last meeting. Given the enormity of the project this begs the question – how many of the

existing Parish Councillor are actually 100% behind the scheme or as we suspect are there a number of Councillors being swept along by a minority vision into a project that they appear to have little understanding of and the consequent full implications that lay ahead?

The Council believes that it is taking a measured, step-by-step approach to this project. The scale of the project is recognised and that is why the current work is underway to establish the basic viability of the scheme. After that, a detailed business plan will need to be drawn up. At this stage, the focus is on establishing whether the project is feasible and economically viable.

The Council is determined to make every effort to work with the community in an open and transparent manner throughout. The forthcoming meeting on the 25 November is an opportunity, both for the Council to walk through the plan, but also for parishioners to ask questions and make comments. The clerk will ensure that comprehensive minutes are taken.